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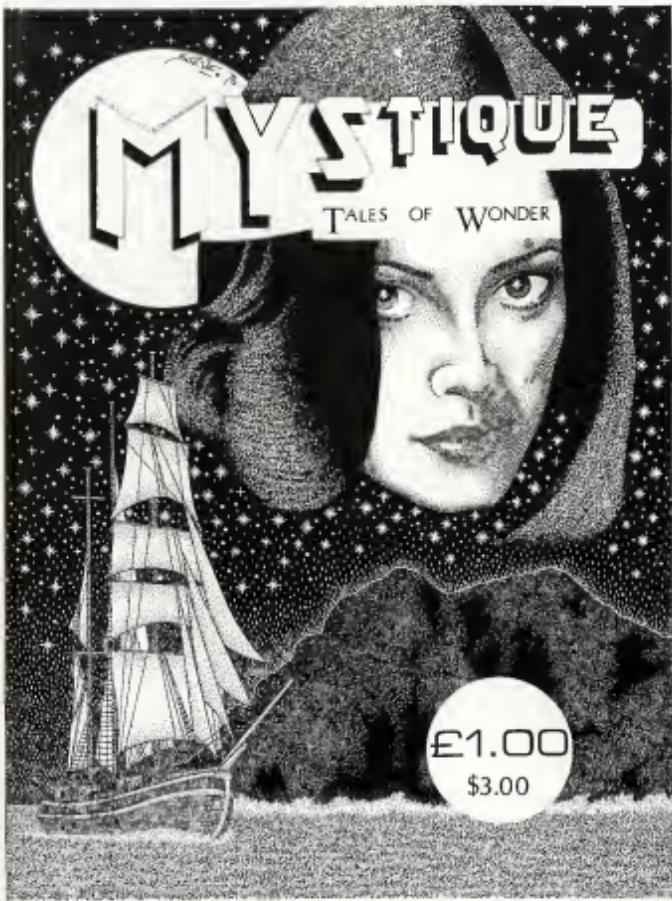
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MYSTIQUE

TALES OF WONDER

BFS BOOKLET 13

MYSTERY • DETECTIVE • WESTERN • ADVENTURE



A BFS AND SALADOTH PRODUCTIONS PUBLICATION

MYSTIQUE

TALES OF WONDER

Welcome to *MYSTIQUE Tales of Wonder*, a homage to those earlier Pulps of the 30s and 40s, when Fantasy and Science Fiction were in their infancy, and Adventure was the name of the game. In this issue, you'll find SF, Fantasy - even a Western - in the purest form; or as the sub-title of this magazine has it: Tales of Wonder. Just throw your disbelief out of the window, and enjoy.

Mike Chinn, January 1988

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THE GRIP OF PEACE

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

If my wife and I hadn't argued before our first hyperflight together this world would still be haunted, but in quite a different way.

This sounds like a shipman's tale, and I'm sure you've had your fill and platelful of those on your way here. But don't put this pamphlet down. I'm not shipping you, be sure. It means what it says on the cover: WELCOME TO HAPPYHOME. Someone will have welcomed you when you left the ship's boat, but they'll have left the welcome tale to me.

I hope you didn't expect me to use a telerecording. We're not much for next best things here. We're personal contact people, and we don't like to undermine that with telecommunication. I may be dead by the time you read this, and I wouldn't want you watching a ghost that's going dim with information decay.

If I'm still around we'll meet at the ragefest tonight. It'll be in the honour of new arrivals, but if you're tensing up for it, don't: that's exactly what you don't need. Just relax and let me tell you my story. My name is Tid Frobes. I'm a doctor. I hope you can read my handwriting.

When I came out of hyperflight my wife Lull was staring at me. The cabin screen was telling us we'd been hyperflying for three hours, and we were one and a half reel hours out of Happyhome. You must have been through it to get here if they still do it that way, so you know how it feels - as if you've nodded off for a moment and the screen has awakened you except that all your senses feel on edge and clutching for something just out of reach: the sagging notion that you had a glimpse of some enormously important concept while you were out, what the shipman call the Unremembered. I had to cope with that and more, because Lull was glaring at me as if I'd fallen asleep while she was speaking. I might well have. We'd been arguing up to the moment of hyperflight, and whatever those activities are we know the brain performs in hyperflight, they might well have been three hours' marshalling of arguments so far as Lull was concerned. "You didn't want to marry me," she said. "You just wanted a nurse you could work with."

"I wanted to take you out of the group," I said. They may well still group back on Starmass Iyes, the red planet that joins its neighbours in making a beary face of its parent body when you catch the orbits right. You could join any group if you knew someone in it, and once in you shared everything, including each other. "You said yourself you needed more real demands made of you."

"But I didn't say I wasn't happy in the group." People matured from one group



ARTWORK BY

ALAN HUNTER

to the next; sometimes couples married. It's surprising the number of people you meet again in different groups; Luli and I had met in two, though we weren't consciously pursuing each other. You were never asked to leave a group, but the trendors tended to drift away. "I think you signed for this flight just so I'd have to leave," she said.

"But I didn't have to. No torture or hypnosis was involved." We're doing well, I thought bitterly, for seven weeks married. I'd hoped to persuade the shipmen to perform a timebonding ceremony, their marriage ritual which is based on a shared sense of the way the aging of the rest of the universe speeds up during hyperflight; but we'd hardly been in the mood. "If you'd waited for the next tradearcous ship we'd have had a few years to think about marriage," I said. "Maybe we'd have been better suited then."

"Maybe you should have left me behind your time," she said, her eyes furiously moist.

I wondered if we could be based in the next cabin, where our travelling companions, inventors of the peacecube, were berthed. "I'll tell you what we're really arguing about," I said. "Not getting married, and not where we're going either. You were the one who couldn't wait to breathe open air. No, you're frightened of remembering the Unremembered. You were frightened before we went into hyperflight, you can only be more so now. I don't know why you can't just worry that the autometrics might fail, like I do. Not that they have for canturians."

Her eyes said I was right, but the way they focused past me showed I couldn't have handled my understanding worse. Her mouth was moulding a cold grin around a retort when she was interrupted. "Engineers Pepe Bain, Hodd Tangus, Doctor Ted Probes, Nurse Luli Probes," the screen called.

"See," I said, hastily unstrapping myself from my couch, "we're separated already."

"All please report to the communal area to discuss urgent message from Happyhouse," the screen said. Only it didn't say Happyhouse, since the world was then described and located by a mass of symbols only a computer could pronounce with conviction, or want to.

"Maybe we are better in a group than with each other," I said. "Let's see."

I was glad to leave the rounded-off cube of the cabin, for it made me feel quarantined - which of course I was, along with anyone else who wasn't shipborn. Loudly silent, we walked along the imperceptibly curving corridor to the dining/viewing/recreational area. Pepe was saying "Engineers indeed," and Hodd said "What else are we?"

Ahead through the viewport, Happyhouse was a pale apple pelted with two giant paralysed amoebae of water, slowly filling with glints as the world turned. "So what do you think is urgent?" Pepe said. "Too much good air, too much fresh food?" I tended to agree with her innuendo; there couldn't be any cause for alarm on Happyhouse. We four were heading there not because we thought medical staff were urgently needed, but because we were attracted. Even the local microbes had ready-found answers in the Sternose antibiotic laboratories; and otherwise Happyhouse was a world of bright airborne insects and mostly edible vegetation, scattered with all the periods of architecture of a long-gone race - like a planet-sized archaeological exhibit.

"I suppose it would have been too much to expect the ship to transmit the message direct to us," Hodd said. "We might have breathed germs all over the transmission."

A disapproving shipman's face jerked into frame on the screen beneath the viewport. "Message from Happyhouse follows," she said. "Unidentified local effect has caused breakdown of colony structure and of many individual personalities. Be ready to conduct psychological stabilizing of thirty-one cases. Remaining eighteen colonists have also requested permission to board."

"That's not in their own words," Hodd said.

"That is an accurate digest of the message received," the shipwoman said. "We were unable to record."

"Can we tell them we'll be ready?" Luli said to me.

"We shall transmit your assurance," the shipwoman said, interrupting my nod. "Since we are only an hour from arrival, we have not the time to convert your screens for transmission. You would of course need bridge permission to use the main transmitter, as well as lengthy sterilization."

"I would just love," Hodd said, sitting forward with a vicious smack of her heels on the deck, "to go and *smash* over the lot of them!"

"All cabins in your section will be made available," the screen said. "Five extra couches will be supplied for use in the communal area. We are trying to determine whether your home world will fund our return there with your patients....I am now informed that Sternose has taken responsibility for this deviation. We shall orbit Happyhouse for three days to allow you to prepare your patients for hyperflight."

"There's a lot that's unremembered on this ship," Hodd said, "such as human feeling." But the screen was blank. "God's bones."

"I know, but never mind," Luli said. "Let's make sure the couches are ready."

"At least we'll be able to give the peacecubes an optimum test," Pepe said, looking slightly worried.

"That reminds me," I said. "I just want Pepe and Hodd to explain to me exactly how peacecubes work."

"Well, good. Good!" Luli shouted and stalked away, trailing a promise of the next instalment of our argument.

"We'll hurry," Pepe called after her, and Hodd shrugged. When I caught up with them they were already unpacking the foam-lined carriers in their cabin. Hodd lifted out one of the three inch cubes in its heavy metal sheath and handed it to me with what I immediately discovered wasn't delicacy but controlled strength, for the weight of the cube was considerable. "Forty-eight cubes," she counted, "a cube in the eighth, the twenty-fourth, the fortieth, and one in the communal room."

That was the cube with which they explained. The rim of Happyhouse had swelled and was touching the frame of the viewport. "Once it's unsheathed," Hodd said, "the cube is triggered by any form of suffering and goes to work on soothng it, which it does by one of a number of methods which the trigger selects. Redirecting the patient's preoccupation, intensifying memories of pleasure, focussing on any positive philosophy the patient may have, and so on. It's a little like the old anaesthetics."

"Nothing of the kind," Pepe said. "It's a substitute for telepathic nursing. If there hadn't been so little need for practical nursing on Sternose we wouldn't have had to invent this."

Two young shipmen, sealed from head to foot in sterilized snapsuits over their clothes, were setting up extra couches around us. "Maybe," Hodd said. "Anyway, you can see that's a lot of work for something this size to do, even today."

"Now hold that!" Pepe said. "The telepaths who imprinted the cubes did all the work. It took a lot of discipline for them to produce universal responses."

"You don't need to envy them," Hodd said. Luli was trying to help the shipmen as they doctored around the other side of the couches. Her violently silent back was turned to us. "We're going to need to educate the montaleptic medical profession to use cubes. I mean, we don't want doctors operating with a worry somewhere in their minds and inadvertently getting high on a cube."

And so on, chipping away at each other's ideas. That must have been the way they worked on inventing the peacecubes, I thought, and they succeeded then. The shipmen fled. Pepe unsheathed the pale green crystal cube for a few seconds but I didn't feel anything, perhaps because I didn't feel I was suffering. Pepe said to Hodd "I wish you hadn't made that remark about the Unremembered. It's basically a religion, you know." I went to find Luli, but she snapped a couch cocoon angrily at

80.

Yes, all this has to do with the haunting of Happyhome.

If you think we might have been insufficiently prepared for the cases that were boated up from Happyhome an hour later, you're right. We'd expected the kind of fraying of personality that may develop in a small closely dependent pioneer group, the casualties of authority conflict, a few cases of world shock for variety. We weren't ready to meet a biochemist cradling the ghost of her second miscarriage. Nor a nutritionist who had to be ferried separately from an ecologist to prevent his breaking the latter's jaw again. Nor two engineers, transport and electrical, both laughing harshly until one burst into tears and the other followed, until either led back to laughter. All we could do was persuade everyone to lie down, the worst cases nearest a paccubae, and unsheathe the cubes. Then we wandered among them, feeling our concern dimming as the cubes took hold, then flooding back like adrenaline as we moved beyond them. The boat went down for the rest.

Even those we theoretically weren't treating were lying down. All except the correlator of the group, a psychologist called Held. If it hadn't been for a sense of tight unrelenting control, as he consciously preselected his every movement, you might not have realised he was from Happyhome. He stood in the entrance to the communal area, beyond the radius of the cubes, groping for memories. "It was a model colony at first," he said. "No arguments, no conflicts, total community. Then gradually things went wrong. Some of the most placid of us began to lose their tempers for no reason and commit spurs of the moment violence. That was five, six years ago. We called for aid but of course you were on your way in hyperflight. Things became so bad nobody could bear to be touched, they were sure to have a flash of violence. So the colony moved apart. There were no children, only miscarriages. What happened as people were left alone you can see."

His lips didn't move like a talking mouth, they looked as if he were operating them from behind with his fingers. "Whatever it is, it isn't chemical. It isn't in the food or the atmosphere. It isn't microbiotic. And I'm sure it isn't world shock. All I know is it can't be perceived, not even when it's working on you."

The people lying in the communal areas were stirring and muttering uneasily; I knew I should go to them but Held was staring at me as if he'd fitted his fingers within his symbols. "There was one thing," he said. "People dreamed. I did myself lately. You know a good deal of the local architecture is still standing. No records of the race, those must have been destroyed or decayed. Just the architecture. The more recent it is, the simpler it's become. The early building is complex, then there are things like spiral shells, and the last forms of all are spheres. There's only one place they're found and that's near the colony. They're about a thousand years old. We never knew what they were for. But people dreamed about them. Every night."

His eyes were full of what he thought that meant, but he wouldn't tell me. I might have asked if one of the others hadn't swung himself off his couch, shouting "There it is! That's what's doing it!" and pointing at the paccubae. They were all shouting and pointing. I could hear it spreading into the cabins. The doors were opening and they were all converging on the nearest cube.

Held stepped within the radius and shrank back. "You mustn't use that, whatever it is," he said. "Not on these people."

That was all he could or would say. Pefa and Held sheathed the cubes, looking morose and baffled. Luli and I injected the patients with soporifics. I wondered what we might have to use when they came out of hyperflight. Held refused his injection and went from couch to couch, gazing down at the sleepers. "It's what I was for," he said.

In the morning - which is to say, when the viewport had to be dimmed because the light on the larger see was spilling in and searing our eyes - they were all still asleep. We'd given them the maximum dose; if they hadn't improved when they awoke, one more would take them up to hyperflight. Held awoke on a couch, glaring

about with a vengeance look for the thief of his consciousness, as Pefa and Held arrived to begin their shift. I heard Held begin to ask him something, but Luli and I were trudging away to sleep.

Later, as a timid, unapprised shipgirl brought us food, averting her eyes for fear of having to watch us eat, Held explained why she'd consulted Held. "We stick it up our noses, if you want to know" she called after the girl, and to me: "Evidence is that whatever broke up the colony takes years to accumulate and works only down there. I'm assuming brief contact with it won't affect us later. So we're going down."

"We need an inkling why the paccubae don't work," Pefa said.

"Certainly," Held said. "And I can't say I'll mind upsetting the shipmen, either. You know how they dislike the idea of leaving the ship for a nasty unhygienic world. I wonder why. Maybe it makes them feel there's too much universe for the unremarried to control after all."

I shared the urge she was trying to hide: to prove herself superior to the shipmen, who had mastered and built a philosophy upon the vertiginous clutching of the mind after hyperflight. We four needed to dissociate ourselves from the shipmen, for Sternose had been a closed environment too: exhilarating gravity, tracts of vegetation and integrated architecture, everyone's favourite hydroponic foods, but doses pressed down over it all to keep out the killer atmosphere. We'd needed the outward call of Happyhome; we'd been settling into the stasis of a disinfected perfection. "How many do we need to look after the patients?" I asked Luli.

"The soporifics have twelve hours to run. One can manage for the rest of the day."

"We'll draw lots," Pefa said.

"Don't bother. I'll stay."

"Are you sure?" I asked Luli. "Wouldn't you like to go in the open?"

"I've said no, haven't I?"

"We'll be away for a couple of hours, no more," I said. "There's no danger. Don't worry." But she'd turned away, almost colliding with Held, who was frowning anxiously at us.

When we landed the shipman pilot hardly gave us time to clear the field. I felt as glad as Held that he would have to brave the world again in two hours to retrieve us. We stood at the edge of the colony and gazed about.

After the controlled and unchanging illumination of the ship, what overwhelmed us was the sunlight. A yellowish sun settled in the blue-tinted sky, brushing off occasional white clouds, and as they slid from the light welled up intoxicatingly. The pale green grass, the fifteen foot vegetables that clustered nearby like a gathering of salting pink spoons with loured heads, the squat round flat-topped white buildings of the colony, all swam in the light, piercingly clear. "Let's get the transport," Held said.

We'd borrowed a map of the colony and its surroundings from Held. As we walked through the colony I glanced up at the raised observation roofs. I imagined colonists gazing out on their landscape. When this hospitable world had been discovered, so near in hyperflight terms to Sternose, all we specialists in the minutiae of our world had looked up from our microanalysis and outward again. I remembered my joy at the promise of being able to practice rather than theorise. I was sure that if this world proved uninhabitable it could only add to the suffocating apathy back on Sternose. I gazed up at the empty raised roofs. A few grains of dust spelt down.

One groundcar had been driven into the edge of the parking bay and left there, buckled. We took another car and headed for the oldest of the nearby groups of surrounding architecture, at Pefa's suggestion. Since the colonists must have performed all the obvious analyses, she felt we needed to be intuitive. We left the flexite cover turned back and listened for sounds above the drone of the car. The

pale grass stirred in a breeze, as if ruffled by cloud-shadow.

Our first sight of the buildings was of a series of irregularly-spaced stone loops rising over the horizon. Half a mile separated the furthest apart. The nearer we approached the more beauty our eyes became. Eventually Hodd, who was driving, had to halt the car.

The loops were only the highest tips of an intricate filigree structure, formed of intertwining coils and arcs of multicoloured stone. Some arcs were covered with ring-like protrusions, others bulged like a snared snake and were living-quarters, to judge from the openings they displayed. The whole was over fifty feet high. "I'm surprised it wasn't this the people dreamed about," Pefo said.

We walked closer but didn't venture beneath the structure. "Look at the foundation," Hodd said. "The whole thing was carved from a single block."

I suddenly saw that the structure looked like a nest of inextricably ossified rainbow. "If we knew anyone as aesthetically obsessed as this race must have been, we'd be treating them," I said.

We were glad to drive on, spreading ripples through the fields of grass, which stirred like the fur of a sleepy cat. The stone mass sank beneath the horizon. "I'd like to think it was back there, but no," said Hodd. "Hodd said they went over it thoroughly: nothing. Not all of them visited it, so it couldn't have been a psychological effect. And besides, that wouldn't explain why they dreamed of the other arcs."

Soon the next set of architecture was mounting the horizon. As Hodd had said, they were like spiral shells, revealing themselves ring by coiled white ring as we approached. Each of the forty-nine buildings was composed of seven rings and a topaz point. They were arranged in a square of seven ranks. Grass stirred feebly at their bases, as if crushed, and clouds of insects faceted with colour flickered swiftly between them. As I gazed at the cloning of massive cones I became aware of Pefo, who had frozen, listening intently.

"I'm trying to get hold of a feeling I've had since we landed," she said. "Have you ever read what it was like in the eye of a cyclone? A kind of uneasy calm. I suppose it's just as quiet after the ship."

I remembered the call-notes and the whirrs and creaks of energy, and listened to the hissed breath of the grass, and nodded. Hodd had entered the base of a cone. As we followed I was counting the narrow vimealite in each ring: seven in the topmost, fourteen in the next down, and so on.

We looked through an open exit from the spiral hall into the first room. The ceiling reminded us gently to sleep. The cones were clearly a simplification of some of the forms of the multicoloured structure, but still I felt raw with unease. It wasn't the desecration, for the abandoned colony hadn't bothered me. It wasn't the unfamiliar functions of the seven-slitted room, with its oddly scooped stone benches and its hornlike carvings protruding from the wall. What I found intensely disturbing was the formality of the place. It made even the clinical life of ship-board and Starnose seem preferable.

I was glad when we'd left the cones below the horizon. We swathed our way towards the colony. Before we reached it we'd encounter the last construction the lost race had made. Pefo was staring ahead, dashing her hair from her face. The grass hissed by and leapt from beneath our wheels, scattering in our faces.

At first I didn't realize I was seeing the spheres. Something was gleaming like trapped stars through the grass. As we came nearer the grass sank like cloud from the lights, leaving them suspended within a faint circular presence. They were manufactured spheres of transparent crystal, at whose centre a steady light was contained. There were five of them, set equidistantly along a strewn line. We stood in front of the central sphere and the light gazed at us.

"They're the lost race," Pefo said suddenly.

"What?" said Hodd sharply, then her eyes widened.

"The light in the crystal. That's where they went, that's why there's no trace

of them. They simplified themselves and their environment until they had psychic control. They must have been preventing everyone from realising, it's too obvious to have been overlooked otherwise. Yes, and it was the struggle to realise that made everyone dress and eventually crack."

"We must tell them," I said. "Once they know they may be able to return to the colony." I was full of ideas, spilling them. I pulled aside a long blade of grass that was obstructing my view of the sphere, and tried to grasp an idea about Luli that was staying out of reach. Yes: I realised the way she'd been mousered to let me come down here, although she would have loved to visit an open world. We have a fine marriage, I thought, despite the superficial turbulence. "We won't have to leave," I said. "I know we won't."

I was still secure with my thoughts behind a smile when the boat returned. Only when Hodd began arguing with Pefo did I rouse myself, and then only to nod. "You're going to have to force a lot into your explanation," Hodd said. "Such as why any race would leave itself so exposed and vulnerable. You'll agree they would be. The fact that you spotted them at once proves that."

"It's cumulative effect, remember. Maybe there are some minds their defence mechanics doesn't work on."

"Such as yours? What you'd like to believe is seldom valid science. Ask Hodd if they analysed the spheres. I assume you aren't saying the spheres could persuade them they'd run a thorough analysis?"

"I don't know," Pefo said furiously. "Maybe they could."

We'd hardly ducked when she was running to the passenger quarters. I'd followed her closely enough to be within earshot of her question to Hodd when Luli rushed up to me, crying "What happened? What have you done?"

I glanced down at my hand, directed by her gaze. The skin between the fingers was black with blood. There was a long deep cut in the palm. "It's all right," I said, wanting to know what Hodd had replied, not wanting Luli to see my disquiet. "I'll see to it."

I hurried to my equipment in the storage area.

When I'd finished examining myself I slumped. The cut wasn't anything antibiotic and a bandage spray couldn't handle. I'd realised by now that I'd cut myself on the blade of grass I'd moved from the sphere. No doubt there'd be no more to feel than the sly tickle of a razor blade, though I couldn't remember even that.

Pefo appeared, looking disconsolate. "Hodd says they took one of the spheres into the colony to examine it," she said. "The light is just sunlight, they blocked it off easily. There's no energy in the spheres. I thought they were something like pacemakers, but they're just objects."

Then I remembered something, but before I could tell her Luli looked in. "As I thought, just a cut," I said. "I'll take over now. You catch up on your sleep." I didn't mean to sound as if I were dismissing her, but after a glare she flounced away.

"You ought to try and see her more," Pefo said. "No, not more. Better." "You could be right," I said. "But look, there's one question we forgot to ask. Let's go and see Hodd."

By now he'd loosened up somewhat, relaxing at last until he caught himself at it. I was afraid he mightn't answer, but he did. "I dreamed the same as everyone else," he said. "I suppose it was like having a blind spot, only you knew there was something hiding behind it. I'd be standing between the spheres and I'd know there was something besides them and the grass. But every time I was on the brink of becoming aware, the awareness was - turned off, I suppose. That's all. It kept repeating until I woke up."

"You and Hodd think," I told Pefo. "I'll think too. It's there somewhere." But all I heard them arguing about was Pefo's image of the eye of the cyclone.

"There's no surrounding violence down there, so where's your cyclone?" Hodd was criticising. It took them long enough, I thought.

I dreamed, not surprisingly, of the spheres. My mind ran through the afternoon's encounter with them. I awoke convinced we'd overlooked something while we were at the spheres, not necessarily anything visual. I lay awake for a long time, pondering.

In the morning the patients were stirring. We gave specifics to anyone who wanted them, which was everyone except Hald. I hoped we weren't creating a psychological dependence. I was becoming more anxious about the effect of hyperflight on these cradled minds, beginning to dread the risk; it had no precedent.

"I want to go down again," I told Lull. "You can manage for a couple of hours." She almost dropped a needle, then caught it and herself.

"I'll be all right," she said. "I hope you find it, whatever it is."

When Pefs and Hodd had slept we went down. "We told him two hours," said Pefs as the boat fled. "Let's leave the car and walk, try to feel the place. We'll still have an hour at the spheres."

For a moment I disagreed, then I thought her intuition might be useful. We walked away from the colony. Today there were no clouds, and the sun turned within its rim etched on the glassy sky. The light gave the pink spoons and the grass a luminous glaze. Our feet passed through the grass with a faint snap and a hiss.

Gradually the silence that surrounded the sounds, isolating and displaying them with what seemed unnatural precision, began to take on a presence. It felt as if the tranquil dazzling field of grass was in the grip of peace. "I know what it is," I said suddenly. "It's a kind of world shock after all. It's the silence, it's stifling. That's what they couldn't stand."

They stared at me, then their mouths opened and they both nodded solemnly. "Let's go to the spheres, anyway," Pefs said after a while.

As we neared the spheres I was thinking how the silence could be tamed. I'd rejected the idea of artificial noises, the piping into the colony of music or natural sound. But we could plant for real natural sound! The calm lights of the spheres seemed to brighten with my mind. We could import some of the Old Earth trees that we dutifully grew on Starhome; we could set the thrashing of branches and leaves against the silence. It would be the first time we'd heard those sounds. It seemed right.

We stood gazing at the spheres. Now I could see them for what they were: repetitions of the same statement of aesthetic perfection, the final result of their creators' formalism. There was poignancy about them; they could only symbolise beauty, and achieved that only by excluding a great deal. They'd been like the peacockes after all, but perhaps they'd become a way of life. I felt pity for the race which had died gazing on them. The lights hung steadily against the grass, like the core of the planet's peace...

At first I didn't register what Pefs was saying. "Suppose the people at the colony were trying to understand the architecture," she said. "We couldn't stand the first set ourselves. They must have gone walking outside the colony, and where else would they go? And the harder they tried to get hold of the progression of the architecture the less they'd have been able to keep their own cultural balance. That's the kind of world shock it was."

Hodd frowned at her, then her face cleared. "My God," she said. "I think you're right."

I stared at them both. Hodd must be joking. It was a total contradiction of my own - My own what? I couldn't remember. I thought, It's just riddic - And this time I felt, for barely long enough to be aware of it, something reach into my mind and deftly snatched the thought away.

That awareness itself felt threatened. All I could do was think about something else. The time. "Time to get back," I said.

"We've a few minutes yet," Pefs said.

My mind was flinching and crying, We must get away! "I'm exhausted," I said. "I'd like to slow down on the way back."

Now I'd committed myself to walking slowly, as if I'd chosen a nightmare. The sun faded down, the field of grass flexed its muscles, the pink spoons nodded slightly in the breeze, and I felt as if I were trying to creep out of a room unnoticed, unable to see whether I was succeeding. Except that it was worse, because I was trying to creep with my mind. It was a long hot trudge, but I didn't feel hot at all.

When we reached the colony the boat wasn't waiting. We should at least have been able to see it leaving the ship. We sat on the edge of the circular landing field. I closed my eyes to contain my panic. All I could see was Lull. If my mind didn't make it to the ship I would never be able to resolve - What? As the insight was instantly suppressed I realised that I couldn't remember our arguments. Pefs called out, and I saw the boat beginning its descent.

Halfway up I felt my mind slip free. "Tell Hodd your theory again," I said to Pefs.

"Don't bother," said Hodd. "I think it's utter nonsense."

"Then why couldn't you say me before?"

I saw a barrier give way within her eyes. "My God," she said.

We found Hald in the communal area. The sharp lines of his face kept collapsing into weariness, then twitching back into the mask. But we surrounded him and insisted on talking. Around us the ship buzzed softly in its sleep, and the colonists snored. Lull stared from the viewport. Hepphume turned slowly in the frame, realising in our time before hyperflight.

"I'm beginning to understand the lost race, I think," Hodd said. "You can see them in their architecture. They grew so obsessed with perfection that they became intolerant of anything else. Presumably that might have included interpersonal conflicts."

"And they managed to leave the effect behind them, haunting the planet," Pefs said.

"Which explains why you couldn't argue," I said. "But it isn't only overt conflict of that kind. There were things I could think about. My image of them was forced to be perfect." Lull looked at me. "I think any potential for conflict is censored. No wonder your people disintegrated," I said to Hald.

"It does explain a good deal," he said. "The tensions must have built up until they had to be expressed somehow. And even the violence was over almost before it began; it must have just slipped through. I never felt it myself, though. I wasn't have had any conflicts. Except being unable to help, and even that didn't seem to matter after a while." He shook a finger at Pefs. "I don't go for this idea of haunting, though," he said. "I'd accept that the race left behind them some kind of physical force, even if it can't be traced."

"How do you know they aren't still there?" Lull asked.

I think she enjoyed our silence. She let it hang before she went on. "You know that something was controlling your thoughts," she said. "Why shouldn't they be able to censor your sight as well? You never found evidence of what destroyed them. Why shouldn't they still be down there, gazing at their spheres?"

Imagine our hours of argument for yourself. But the more we argued the more tempting the hypothesis became: a race that had pursued idealisation and simplification in terms of themselves as well as their architecture, until they'd achieved total control and sensitivity at the price of drastic exclusion. "There's only one answer to that kind of sensitivity to hurt," Hodd said; and amid another silence Pefs said "The peacockes."

There was one way to test the hypothesis: determine whether the solution worked. "Lull, you and I must go," I said. "I felt the effect most strongly." Besides, since we had the most violent arguments we should be more able to feel the cubes distracting and appealing the censors, if they had any effect at all.

In the boat down I said to Lull "Try to feel the tension between us."

"I don't have to try," she said.

But as soon as we stepped onto the field she said "I can't feel it now. I don't like it."

The boat was trembling impatiently. "Come on," I said, hurrying her off the field.

We walked, because I wanted her to become familiar with the sense of censoring. Now I had an explanation it didn't seem so terrifying. Shallow hollows were blown through the grass. As we walked Luli kept trying to frown, then smiling as if someone were dragging at her mouth. Tears were struggling to leave her eyes. I put my arm around her shoulders.

We had four peacockeuses, one for each gap between the spheres. We placed them in the centre of each gap, then moved back beyond their radius. Everything's fine, I thought, knowing that meant it wasn't at all. I returned to my first cube, moved it a fraction, retrailed and tried to feel. Then Luli did the same. It was exactly like trying to tune an invisible musical instrument, except that we were unable to perceive any pitch until it was perfectly tuned.

The sun was sinking, the fields were stubbled with shadow. I'd managed to beg a ship's conductor to sell the boat; I'd known this would take time, but not so long. Maybe I'd been wrong to assume the spheres were the significant area. Maybe the human telepathic imprints in the cubes weren't sufficiently universal. Maybe our whole theory was wrong.

Exhausted, I saw Luli returning to move her cubes as I moved mine, instead of waiting her turn. "Do you want to wreck this whole thing?" I called. "Just try to contain yourself until I've finished!" – and then I gaped at her. "We've nearly got it!" I shouted. "It's weakening!" It felt like a chess player's flood of inspiration. Two more tiny shifts of the cubes and we felt the clinging presence fall away.

And Luli was staring at me, all her emotion brimming over. "You brought me down here to use my feelings!" she cried. "Just to be sure this worked."

"Your feelings?" I shouted. "My God, it's you who use your feelings. You expect me to share your moods as a matter of course, and when I don't you use that as an excuse not to communicate?" Then we had the most violent row either of us had ever experienced. All the poison burst forth at once. We yelled, pummelled, struggled in the slashing grass.

We fell silent only because we were exhausted. In the silence we heard theoughing of the world. We suddenly realized that we'd made it ours. We gazed at each other and saw how quickly we'd become mutually blind. We shared all this wordlessly; then we made love on the grass, beside the dimming spheres.

And that's really how Happyhouse began. It was Held's idea to bring the colonists back down. The shipmen resigned themselves to what they obviously believed was the total insanity of their passengers. Even we weren't sure Held was right that the new Happyhouse was the most convincing form of therapy, not even after he'd been down himself and stood roaring in the fields for half an hour, looking absolutely at ease when he rejoined us. But hyperflight seemed more of a risk, and you can see now he was right.

We've fanned off the spheres, of course. We don't want anyone moving the peacockeuses. But it's useful in some ways to be hemmed; we're never likely to have an immigration problem. Sometimes I wonder if our solution wasn't like stuffing a baby full of candy to shut it up. But then I think no, they had their chance and made their choice. Now they have to be satisfied with what they wanted. After all, they have perfection.

At least that's my opinion. There are people who disagree and can argue all night. Still, that's what makes a ragerfest. Just let your emotions come as they will and don't bother who gets them in the face; they can take care of themselves. We started the ragerfests to make sure the cubes were working. But apart from that, they seem to help us get on very well together the rest of the time. We know you will too. As well as Luli and I.

* * *

THE ORGAN BANK CAPER

SYDNEY J BOUNDS

"And so, another case came to a satisfying and scientific conclusion..."

John Maracot, scientific detective, perched his lean body on a lab stool, set an egg-timer and toyed with the latest 3-D puzzle. Surely he could do better than seven seconds?

As Maracot finished dictating another memoir, "Red" Hockney, ace reporter, changed the tape in his machine and said, "Guess I'll call this one *The Invisible Ray Murders*."

Maracot made a face. "Want you be so crude?"

"That's the sort of title that sells," Hockney defended.

The office receptionist chimed. "Doctor Tabor wishes to consult you."

Maracot brightened immediately. "Send him in."

Doctor Tabor, short and bald, seemed worried as he opened the door and entered the laboratory.

Maracot switched off the egg-timer and allowed his puzzle to collapse into 2-D. He waved his hand at Hockney.

"This red-headed giant is my biographer. You can speak freely in front of him, doctor."

"I own a private organ bank," Tabor said, and handed Maracot his card.

As Maracot took it, the card lit up with an advertising sign:

Body Re-building by Experts
Used Jungs, hearts and limbs
Donors freshly killed to your order

"We're missing some body parts," Tabor said, "despite tight security and armed guards. Some part disappears every night – by now, there's almost enough gone to build a complete person. It's a total mystery."

"Frankenstein lives?" Hockney quipped.

Tabor shuddered. "Don't please! This business has got me believing in spooks." Maracot frowned and rubbed the side of his aquiline nose. His eyes burned with a zealous fervour.

"Intriguing. Distinctly promising. My recent cases have been mundane – yes, I think I'll take this case."

"The Walking Parts Mystery?" Hockney suggested.

"What you?" Maracot donned a bullet-proof cape and slouch hat. "Let us proceed to the scene of the crime. Every mystery has a scientific explanation."

They descended to the underground garage where the detective's armoured hovercar waited, already filled with investigative equipment.

"Give directions, doctor," Maracot said as he took the controls.

They arrived at Tabor's organ bank, a solid concrete block with steel bars across smoked glass windows. Tabor pressed his thumb against a scanner and the door opened.

Inside, the air was cool. The two security guards in the hell-eyed Maracot

warily.

"You needn't stay here tonight," he told them. "My assistant and I will do what's necessary."

They appeared relieved and left quickly, and Doctor Tobor showed him around. Racks of limbs hung from hooks; and hearts, livers and lungs were displayed in glass jars on shelves.

"A regular butcher's shop," Red Hockney commented.

Tobor pointed at a metal door at the rear. "Our deep freeze."

Maracot checked the doors and windows; all were locked with approved security devices.

"Looks good," he said, rubbing his hands. "All right, doctor, leave it to us. We'll bring my equipment in and set it up. I'll soon find out what's going on here after dark."

After Tobor had left, Maracot arranged his black boxes at strategic intervals around the organ bank and plugged into the mains supply. He switched off the overhead lighting, leaving only a glow of night lights, and brought two chairs from the office.

"Compose yourself, Red. We may have a long wait."

Maracot relaxed in his chair, closed his eyes and practised deep breathing.

Hockney murmured: "Real eerie, this place. Like zombie-land. I'm not too sure you're going to find a scientific explanation for this one."

Maracot's lips curved in a faint smile.

Presently traffic noises faded away. There was only the hum of an air-conditioner. The wall clock ticked into the early hours.

Then came a faint sound.

Maracot relaxed in his chair, fully alert as he looked for the source of the sound. The door of the deep freeze opened and a caricature of a man hobbled out.

One leg was longer than the other, the head was set at an angle on the neck and obviously didn't belong to the body. The stomach gaped open.

Maracot heard Hockney's sudden intake of breath and laid a restraining hand on his assistant. He mouthed Quiet!

The almost-a-man shuffled slowly along the racks of spare parts, helping himself to this and that, trying bits for size. He fitted something into his stomach.

"Jesus," Hockney muttered. "What's that?"

Maracot suppressed a chuckle. "Alimentary, my dear Hockney!"

Red started to get up.

"Whoa!"

The spare part body seemed to have finished equipping itself. It turned and looked about. It saw them, paused a moment, then began to move towards them.

Maracot pressed the switch in his hand and a dazzling blue-white light crackled about the strange figure, completely encasing it.

"Now you can move, Red," he said briskly. "I've caged it in a network of magnetic radiation. Let's see what we've caught."

He switched on the overhead lighting and walked towards the intruder.

The newly completed body looked back at him with a hunted expression. The mouth opened to make a croaking sound.

"Vocal cords stiff from disease," Maracot observed. He addressed the intruder. "Well, explain yourself. What are you doing here?"

The words came slowly. "I am a ... visitor ... to your world."

"Obviously," Maracot said, unimpressed. "A alien. And, I suspect, an immortal life form."

"Immaterial ... ethereal, yes. To explore your world ... I need a body. I built this one."

"Jesus, a do-it-yourself alien," Hockney muttered into his tape-recorder.

"There are others of your kind coming," Maracot added.

"Yes ... many."

John Maracot smiled with satisfaction.

"I think, my dear Hockney, I shall retire from the scientific detection business. It never did pay, anyway. I shall buy a share in this organ bank and open a tourist agency!"

* M *



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IN THE GREEN SAND

ARDATH MAYHAR

Behind us, the desert was sinking into shadow. The coppery sun was halving itself on the knife-edge of the horizon. Ghair sank to his knees, gulping the cooling air as if it might be the water we both craved.

I turned to look over the backtrail. Nothing moved. I'd have grimed at Ghair, but my cracked lips were too sore and stiff, so I gestured vaguely towards the direction in which we were fleeing. "No sign of 'em," I croaked. "The wind is erasing our tracks as quickly as we make 'em. We're home free!"

His black eyes studged me from the folds of his antique leather face. "Oh? Free to go where? To do what? I think, Arroy, that we would have done well to risk their justice, whatever it is, rather than dare what we may find out here. True justice is a terrible thing. And the thing we did... I wish there had been no children involved. Deserves the worst that justice can deal us. Death in the desert is no joy, and there are things even worse."

"I know, desiria, Ghair. I'll keep us alive, believe me."

"This is not Terra. Your love may fail you here."

I looked towards the west. Night raced up behind us, and the setting sun cast ridges of shadow towards us, making mountains of the dunes and cities of the tumbled piles of rock. I shivered, then controlled it.

"As long as we're alive, I'll believe that I can make it," I said. "Now we have to find shelter. You must rest, and it will be cold soon. We've pushed ourselves too hard. Your kind doesn't stand that sort of thing as well as mine." I shifted my pack more comfortably and started off directly into the sun's disc. Ghair's steps rasped after me. We said nothing, as the purple night of Eldorain overtook and swallowed us.

The darkness was relieved by a pale wash of starlight. Eldorain had no moon. I set my gaze upon the one cluster I recognised and moved onward, as nearly as I could judge, towards the largest pile of rock that we had seen before darkness fell. If we could dig into the warm sand at the feet of the stones, taking advantage of the ability of stone to hold heat, perhaps the chill of the desert night would have less opportunity to get into our bones.

The pile was huge and still very hot. I dropped my pack and felt about for a spot in a cranny, out of the wind. The sand was soft and easily scraped aside.

"Here," I said. The sound of my voice was somehow startling in the silence.

Ghair dropped beside me. "A good place... and you found it in the dark?" His

ARTWORK BY

JIM PITTS



tone was a compliment.

We dug quietly until we had a good deep burrow, into which we crawled. Then we set for a long time without speaking.

I found myself listening to the anonymous whispers of sound about us. A slithering ... reptiles? On this world, I wasn't certain. Wind sighed about the rocks. Things less identifiable hissed and clicked — very rasping on the nerves.

I rested well, though I didn't sleep. After a long time the rock became damp with condensation. I nudged Ghair awake, and we licked the gritty moisture from the rock. It was too little to measure, but it relieved our parched lips and throats a bit. When we were done, we rose, still without words, and went forward again towards the invisible mountains that should lie beyond the horizon.

The way was now rough, with tusked stones blocking our way. We groped through rubble, barking our knees and falling over buried obstacles. At last we had to stop and wait for the blast-furnace sun to light our way.

When the sky grew light, we looked forward and stared incredulously. A city stood there. The piles of rough litter had been outlying suburbs, fallen to ruin. The walls of that city loomed above us, unbroken, though the gates hung open on loosened hinges. Centuries of wind-blown sand was piled against their massive leaves.

Ghair's yellow face held doubt. "This is not a good place, Akroy. You have no trust in instinct. You prefer proofs and testings, but my people have abilities that have kept us alive for millennia. Those tell us that we must turn our backs upon this city and go to meet the mountains ... or our deaths."

I laughed. I'd always derided Ghair's beliefs, though they had often been too accurate for comfort. Now I was caught in the trap of my own conditioning. Also, I was curious to a fault. I could no more pass that city without looking into it than I could retrace my steps ... or retract that deed that had sent me fleeing into the wastes.

"Wait here, then," I told him. "I'll take part of the supplies. If I find water, I'll come back for you."

"Even if you find water, do not come for me," he said. He had known I would explore. We'd been together too many years for him to have any doubt of that. He parcellated out the concentrates we had stolen from our ship's stores before departing. With a grunt, he sank onto the sand to watch me go.

As I moved, I could hear his heathen chant rising into the morning. Those Kheri! Superstitious to the end!

The well was not as near as it had seemed. That was an illusion caused by its enormous size. Once beneath the arch of the gate, I leaned there to catch my breath. The great panels were sheathed in metal, which had preserved the wood.

I stepped inside. The place must be incredibly old ... it was not even a myth, as far as I could recall from my conditioning-tapes on the trip to Eldersin. Now those people neither built nor lived in cities. Only their sophisticated technology assured my own kind that they were not primitives.

Who had built this structure? It was formed of a metal that I, a fair metallurgist, could not identify. I leaned back to thump one of the beams with my fist. It rang with a bell-like note. It was not a known alloy. Not among my kind, at least.

I uncased my beamer and tapped with its butt on the rim of decorated metal around the ege of the portal. A series of musical tones followed my taps, hanging in the air in a chord that built around me. Strange. As I listened, another note found me — a deep commanding tone from further inside the city. With a shuddering groan, the ancient gate-leaves tried to move in their imprisoning sand.

I paused, thinking hard. An empty city was one thing ... long deserted and untenanted. This was something else again.

A row of tall buildings faced the gate. Tightly shuttered, as was every other structure I could see, these houses hinted at treasures sealed inside them. Why else

should the doors be closed so firmly, or the shutters be made of metal?

I am a born scavenger, among other, less respectable, things. I moved into the street and locked up and down it. Nothing moved. I could see only locked houses. The sand in the streets was tracked only by wind-riffles. Doorsteps were drifted deep, and the ridges of the metal shutters were lined with sand.

Now the sun had lighted the sky to yellow, though it had not yet topped the well. The colours of the city glowed about us, green sand, copper-bronze coloured shutters, purple-grey stone. I went along the street, which soon became a tunnel of smaller structures. Not a single door or window was ajar.

It seemed as if the tenants of the city had gone into their houses, one night, and locked themselves in, never to come out again. I wondered what had happened to them. Failure of the water supply? There was no trace of the scars of battle.

I had been keeping watch for a well or a fountain. Emerging into a small plaza, I spied a stone structure in a sort of cul-de-sac opening off the main way. The walls were of frayed stonework. It was domed with an ornate openwork roof. A well?

Beneath the roof was a carved basin. I peered into its depths. A giant of reflection came up a shaft ... there was water there. The scent was sharp in the dry air. Water on stone.

It was too deep to dip up, but there was a stone wheel set into one wall. I turned it, with considerable difficulty. At last I had it going ... three turns, four. A gush of clear water poured into a small trough at the foot of the basin.

I grubbed out my Standard Tester from my pack and poured a few drops into it. It was hard to count off the necessary sixty seconds, but the verdict, when it came, was good. No contaminants, chemical or biological. Safe for humankind, except for *Alibabid*. Safe for most non-humanoid species. Toxic for *Zaerasen*.

I dipped in my hands and brought up a brimming puddle. I was shaking, but I sipped a bit, letting it trickle down my throat. Then I want to signal to Ghair.

I could see him, tall and oddly-jointed, still sitting where I had left him. He didn't look up. He didn't answer my whistled signal. Grumbling, I moved out of the gates, toward him.

"Ghair! Water! Come on!"

He didn't answer. I touched his shoulder and bent to look into his face. What I saw shocked me. He had gone into death-mode. His fragile Kheri frame had suffered from the heat and lack of water for more than my tough human one. I had thought he had some strength left, but now I realized that only his will had brought him this far. Now his body had taken over. That will hadn't been enough to stop the automatic processes.

He was light, which was lucky. I struggled back to the gate with him slung across my shoulders. I almost ran with him to the well. Laying him flat on the stone, I cushioned his head with my pack.

It isn't easy to reverse the death-mode. Once before I had tried it with a Kheri partner. I hadn't succeeded. This time, I was determined to change that.

By the time he swallowed a cup of water, I had put every scrap of cloth we had over him and soaked all with water. I changed the layers as his fevered flesh dried them. He seemed cooler. His eyes lost the unresponsive blankness and flickered with recognition. At last he was looking at me, knowingly. Sadly.

"You have brought me into the city," he said.

"I had to, Ghair. You were dying. It was the only way ..."

"I must die, Akroy. There are worse things than death, though your kind resists that knowledge. What lies in this city is one of those things. Cruel. Terrible. Completely just. I will not face Justice, Akroy. I will go into death." The eyes closed. His face contorted and relaxed, and the eyes slitted open again. He was gone.

Damn Kheri superstitions! Tears formed in my eyes, but I blinked them back. He looked so insignificant, lying there. He had been my partner for years, through

straight and crooked, profitable and dangerous games. Even that last terrible thing we had done ... but I shut out the memory of that. I covered his face with a damp shirt and straightened my back to look at the city.

There was valuable stuff here. Scavenging would be good. Those shutters and doors concealed something ... and what men could look away, I knew that I could find a way to reveal.

I left the packs with Ghair and went away through streets now filled with warm light, though their arrangement deflected the direct rays of the sun. They were also laid out to funnel the breeze. It was comfortable enough, even in mid-morning.

I wandered through circuitous streets, circular courts, spacious market-places. At last I came to a low wall with a decorative doorway. Inside was a park.

Trees were still living there ... some more-than-clever subsurface irrigation system must still be in operation. They were huge things, with trunks of tremendous girth and boughs of roots bracing them. Some ornamental shrubbery still lived, too, though it had run wild. The stone-curbed beds in which they had been planted were crumbling, and about their roots were matted layers of dead twigs and foliage.

The purple-grey stones were laid as paving, looping about pagodas with seats and tables, sunken pools with lotuslike plants still blooming on their stagnant waters. The water system must have been plentiful and well-laid to keep a level in those shallow basins. Beyond the pools the walk led between ranks of statues. Some of the figures were like present-day Eldeiran. Some were rather summilike. Some were even like Zeeraum, strange as might seem, for the city had to predate space travel by millennia.

At the end of the path, there was a temple. It was severely plain, in contrast to the buildings in the outer city. Built of tapered slabs of stone, it was in the shape of a truncated pyramid. Below the protruding lintel, a door stood open.

I was drawn to it, though something inside me hesitated. I thought of Ghair's last words and paused before the door.

Each massive leaf was cut from a single stone. The facing was grooved, and matching tongues had been cut into each panel. The weight had to be enormous. That last priest, on leaving, must have locked manpower to close them.

Inside, it was dark and cool. I had no fear that any stray breeze might close the doors behind me, so I went forward. The interior formed a room so large that the farther wall was dim with distance. At its centre, there was the lip of a pool made of stone scalloped high and pierced with star-shaped holes.

There was no water in that pool. A stair led down the inside in a curve. It, too, was of white stone, and there was no dust there, no debris of ages. It looked very dark down there.

I returned to the park and found enough dead wood to make a torch. There was probably enough power left in my beamer to kindle it, I was sure. When the thing was ready, I went down the shallow steps, curving into the depths until the stair ended in a passage ... and there was light there. I couldn't find its source.

There were no doors in the white stone walls, except for a single set at the farther end. A white door was set into the walls, surrounded by beaded moldings.

I touched it softly. It swung into the darkness beyond ... but the air was fresh. The glow from the hallway showed another door in an opposite wall. It was open, and I moved across and through it. There was real light there.

Golden light streamed up from a well in the middle of a low-ceilinged chamber. It bathed the walls and turned the circle of statues about it into golden shapes.

I paused to stare; then I started. One of those statues had turned its head to stare back at me.

It sat in a thronelike chair and the standing figures. It was squat, broad, its flesh golden. It did not seem to breathe, though I knew it to be alive.

I went forward and looked across the pool of light at the froglike being. It rose, emerald gaze turned towards me. The impact of that gaze rocked me on my

heels. It pierced all the inner defences that I had built up through a lifetime. It exposed all the lies I had told myself, and the things I refused to remember.

That green gaze winnowed me to the bone. Then the creature nodded, once. As if it had found something admirable. I wondered what that could possibly be.

Its assessment done, the thing sat again, grasping a ruby knob on the armrest of the chair. It spoke. I expected to hear a croak, but it was a voice as pure as a glass bell. Speaking in Terranglon:

"So you come to Neam at last, Edward Ackroyd. We have watched your peregrinations among the worlds with interest, knowing that you must come, at last, to us. For your judging."

What was it that Ghair had said about justice? I shuddered. "I come to see the city. No more. Now I will go away."

I laughed. "The Eldor did not pursue you, did you know that? They take no revenge, even for such a wrong as you did to their children. They know that the guilty, once they find this world, can flee in only one direction. That is their nature, as it is that of water to run downhill. You are not the first of your kind to come to us for judging. Your friend was not the first Khari, though they are a kind less prone to wrongdoing than is yours."

"And what do you propose to do to me that the desert hasn't already done?" I asked.

It laughed again. "The wicked always think of justice in terms of pain or death. There are other things ... worse things." It half-turned towards a small table at its elbow and took from it book. It flipped through the pages, running a many-jointed finger down each one. "Had you left that last deed undone - the corruption of children is the one thing we cannot forgive - you might have fared better. That harms the thief, murder the murderer, each carrying its own punishment in the diminishment of the spirit. But that last deed was one we do not forgive."

It stared at me intently. "I might have sent you into the desert, but that would be too quick and easy. I might feed you to our spaw, but that, too, is too fast. Your last deed earned you long suffering. One thing only prevents my sentencing you to the worst punishment we can give. Your love for your companion is the single leavening I find in your heart.

"I sentence you to the city. A house will be open to you. Think long, Edward Ackroyd. You will have the time for that."

An alien hand gripped me, marching me up from the temple, the park, past Ghair's body, to a house, whose door stood open.

A human hand came through the opening to jerk me inside. "Hurry, fool! Help me seal up the door. They will get in! Help me push the bars!"

We set metal bars into heavy loops and sealed the doorway with wax about the edges. The very breeze was stopped out of the house. Then I had the chance to look at the bearded man who had admitted me.

The big room in which I stood was brightly lit. Some dozen beings, human, Khar, even Zeeraum, lurked about its walls in deep chairs. They seemed to be listening; their eyes were faintful.

Then, I too, heard the sounds from beyond the walls. I recognised individual voices ... voices long stopped with dust. I heard the cries of children in the grip of Nephros-wend. I knew the soft weeping that was my mother's. Every crime I have ever done, every ill thought that I entertained in there, outside.

I wish most devoutly that I had left that last deed undone. That Ghair and I had drunk ourselves into stupors and been hauled back to the ship and away. Ghair knew ... there is nothing so terrible as justice.

For all my sins are prowling about this house, hissing at the shutters, prying chilly fingers about the sealed door. All my sins will besiege me ...

For the rest of time!

* M *

UNDER THE GLAMOUR

DAVID SUTTON

Who would have thought that in the closing years of the century mankind was about to be devastated by a startling celestial event. That as men went dutifully onward with their worldly affairs, none had an inkling, not a glimmer of foreknowledge, that their lives would shortly be changed forever.

It was left to the astronomers, and Wallace in particular, to enlarge upon their discovery - that a comet had entered our Solar System and by careful, thrice-checked calculations, would be perturbed by Neptune and thus deflected, cross the path of the Earth. Even in our enlightened age, of science and reason, few of the massed populations of the world fully understood the nature of our celestial environment. That over the millennia our planetary system had attained its natural order, the planets swing about their Sun in precise elliptical orbits and their moons, from Jupiter's twelve minute children of this massive world, to our own solitary satellite, are determined in their revolutions by divine heavenly mechanics. This wondrous family of planets spreads over vast millions of miles of uncharted space.

And beyond the Solar System an immensity of dark, untraced wilderness to the far, far reaches of the stars. Indeed, how could men and women of this world apprehend this strange glamour? Thus it was that beyond the dim recesses of Neptune there lurked these wanderers of the Universe, the comets, and they, with mindless curiosity occasionally ventured into the harmony of the spheres to risk collision and catastrophe.

The perturbation of Neptune in its orbit was at first noted, with thrilling intensity by scientists, as an idle curiosity by the newspapers. In the far-flung continents where civilisation had not yet robed the land with cities and science and machines, people of a more primitive style of life went about their daily round without this intelligence. It would be later, when the object shone in the night sky, that the comet would assume the nature of a portent. Like all the fiery-taled wondrous of history of which we are familiar, it would be heralded as a sign of some god's wrath. And that ire would be the final apocalypse. How right those thoughts would be!

Wallace consolidated those initial discoveries to his students and peers. "Our 'hairy star', not yet visible to the naked eye, has passed close to the planet Neptune and perturbed its orbit." He paused, pointing at the blackboard on which a two-dimensional plan of the various planetary orbits was chalked. "There will need to be

ARTWORK BY
SYLVIA STARSHINE



many more precise calculations before we fully understand what effect this encounter will have on the other bodies, but," and here he paused to indicate the intruder, engraved on a bright yellow band on the board, "about the comet we know a good deal less. Neptune's effect upon it, besides flinging it inwards at even greater velocity, has placed it on a trajectory which will cross the orbit of the Earth."

There was a murmur amongst the attentive audience, of interest that in the age of science mankind was soon to witness, and for the first time be able to study closely, one of the curiosities of the galaxy. The murmur became muted conversation as follows discussed telescopes, plans, field trips to distant lands should such be needed as perihelion approached. The talk evolved with hushed excitement into a babble of voices.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Wallace raised his voice and the flurry of talk petered out in a few seconds. Wallace was, after all, our most noted astronomer and was held in great respect by this gathering in particular. "You miss my point. I have to say, also, that the great machinery of civilization, our noble evolution and that of the wild beasts is about to be tested - tested in the most awful manner..."

No, the gathering throng seemed to say in unison as it dawned upon them.

Wallace spelt it out. "This levitation of the speckways will cross the Earth's orbit at the same point at which the Earth itself will be occupying. Gentlemen, there is to be the greatest collision known to man, and likely man will no longer be around to witness it!"

The audience were before Wallace in this realisation and an uproar followed on the heels of his words. The calculations would be checked, of course. And again and again. The result to be the same. But they scrambled from the lecture hall to do their reckonings, students helping masters in complex work, telescopes for once all tracking one thing, the rest of the Universe forgotten. Others in that gathering took their reports back to Fleet Street and on the following day the idle account of the comet's visitation had moved from the tailpiece of a column to the front page. END OF THE WORLD the leaders said, subtitled Space Wanderer to Crash into Earth, or something similar in a hundred papers around the world. Of course, Wallace's claims had not yet been substantiated, but the Press wouldn't wait for that. It was news. And in fact, as the weeks went by the reports did not alter much. Some said that the comet might skite past us, but that hardly counted for much as the astronomer who expressed this opinion also stated that even a close miss would result in untold devastation.

Then came the assertions and pontifications on the precise expectations for mankind and the world. These varied wildly in tenor, depending on the quality of the newspaper or magazine; and more soberly thought-out predictions tended to be swamped by the Yellow Press.

We could certainly expect earthquakes and tidal waves and volcanic eruptions of gigantic proportions. Dormant volcanoes could be expected to wake from their slumber. Islands would undoubtedly be engulfed. Great Britain itself was put on the list of places to be drowned in the deluge. The more lurid reports spoke of the Earth splitting open, disintegrating; of the atmosphere being ripped off as the comet hurtled by and everyone dying of asphyxiation. Theosophy had its say-day, as places were found, strange Shangri-Las that offered salvation. Whole movements planned their imminent re-location to these Atlantean strongholds, which, apparently, would be immune to the cosmic monster.

And as these bizarre rituals developed and the Christian faith battled with salvation for the increasing multitudes, so the sociologists and philosophers had much to observe and pontificate upon. The world had suddenly become a very different place and yet, despite the gloom that hovered over every head, the day-to-day business of our ordered planet went on as normal. Wars continued to be fought as though they mattered any longer; politicians turned a blind eye and passed their laws and statutes. Even the humble crofter, alone on his treeless island, went about cutting peat as though days would follow days into eternity.

As the years waned so did interest in the forthcoming collision, though it was in the back of everyone's mind. Wallace withdrew from the glare of publicity and pondered on his momentous announcement and tried to imagine that his calculations were in error. He willfully faulted in his work that were not there. To be the bearer of such tidings weighed heavily upon him. He sat, a small man whose round face, with its pale eyes, and insignificant lips, had the imprint of a lost, disembodied spirit upon it. He dreamed of a world in which he did not exist. Perhaps that the comet would not exist. He sat one night on the eve of Christmas in such solitude, his study dark with the frosty night. His hands crawled over the papers on his desk, his writing a blur. Carole singers bearing a lamp peered under his window and in the glow his littered desk was etched and seemed like a desecration of his life. The writing on his papers withered and the dew-drop at the end of a syringe glowed gaudy orange.

In the birth of the New Year a surmuration of fear began to insinuate itself into the people. It was caused by the first unaided sight of the comet and by its rapid enlargement in the clear winter night skies. The world's telescopes still tracked its motion across the constellations and saw the wonder of its tail. For most it appeared as a star becoming ever brighter, so dazzlingly bright that it began to draw attention away from the Moon. Soon its vapours and tenuous tail would spread across millions of miles of space and into the minds of millions. It came, terrible and swift.

In lands unaffected by scientific endeavour, shamans assessed the portent. Tribes began their rituals to ward off the prophecies of doom. Every natural catastrophe that occurred was put down to the comet, even though it was still too far away to have even the most tenuous effect. In the wider sphere of world affairs, groups began performing their own rituals, creating their own religions in an attempt to change the course of the future. Suicide had become frequent and soon the laws we cherish were to be broken with increasing frequency by those who decided that life had lost its vitality. The world no longer held beauty, nature was merely a quirk and so with it was the evolution of man; a single small and passing fancy by God, let go to the whim of the Universe.

When half the size of the Moon in the summer night sky and awesomely beautiful even with the havoc it was about to wreak, mankind's temper turned. Everywhere a resignation produced lassitude. It took all the skills of international diplomacy and political skill to encourage farmers to produce food and workers to produce energy, for some semblance of civilisation to continue to the bitter end. In some states brutal coercion was the order of the day, but the most part the world's supplies of food and raw materials were still produced, if less efficiently.

Suddenly wars stopped as the blazing white comet dominated the sky both night and day. Yes, when it became visible in daylight then no one could ignore its terrible aspect. A strange irony, Wallace thought, that it takes the destruction of us all to stop wars on Earth. He sat in his room, brooding during that long hot year, wishing no visitors and gaining few attempts, for friends, families, brothers, sisters - all familial relationships were strained to their highest degree. For a few the nightmares brought them together as nothing else can. For most the portent had unleashed an isolation in every individual, a new and frightening realisation that each person is alone with his thoughts and feelings.

Wallace was reading a book, trying to ignore the tropical heat that had strained the water supplies of England all summer long, when the first earthquakes began. In those continents where such catastrophes are expected from time to time they came with an added dimension of violent upheaval, but in a place such as this the rumbling of the earth and the crashing of crockery, even the collapse of a few buildings was a profound psychological shock. The growling earth lasted several minutes before it was replaced by a stunned silence. Outside his window Wallace stared at the orb of fire, seeming so far and still, but growing bigger day by day and with each passing day so the speed of the monster quickened. As he gazed

skyward, doors banged open and the multitude ventured dazedly into the cracked streets.

The people wandered like zombies, hardly talking and it appeared to Wallace that they were in a dream, a nightmare, as though hypnotised. How could we have come to this, he asked himself. Why had Nature's evolution not taken account of such a possibility? He looked around his study and saw, for the first time in months, the aquor that he had become. He hardly knew it as his home. Books scattered by the quake lay on the detritus of his unkempt life and an appalling horror began to overtake him. Wallace searched frantically for the phials he needed, tipping treasured remedies aside as though they were rubbish. Then, as a calm took control of Wallace's mind, he heard more noises from below and, looking out the window he saw them - a mob of neighbours looking up.

"He couldn't imagine what they wanted. "You!" someone shouted. "It's all your fault!" The crowd breathed in agreement.

"Me?" Wallace spoke. Then he knew what they meant. He had after all announced the meeting of two worlds, had performed the necessary calculations to describe the fact. In a bizarre illusory state the crowd had defined a new paradigm, had found logic in their gestalt. When they surged up the staircase Wallace unlocked the door to his rooms. As they burst in upon him and stopped briefly at the threshold, he held his arms out in an offering of entry, the ragged sleeves of his shirt flopping open, revealing a scattering of dotted red marks on his arms. The crowd, like a single animal moved forward growling for their sacrifice. They had become like bees, each individual will subjugated to that of the hive, the all-important task being their preservation and the destruction of the intruder. Wallace at last closed his eyes and turned in order not to see their rigid faces like masks, and the violent, twitching white hands stretched before them, bloated by the dull foaming of the opiate in his brain. And in a second the flashing of his life hurtled him, crashing through the many entrances and exits of his existence and, opening his eyes, he stepped through the final opening, the green door in the white wall.

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The 1988
WORLD FANTASY
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The prestigious World Fantasy Convention comes to Britain for the first time next year. To be held in London over the Hallowe'en weekend - October 28th-30th, 1988 - the theme is *Ghosts & Ghosts* and the Guest of Honour is Britain's biggest-selling horror author, with numerous other professionals expected to attend. As usual, memberships will be strictly limited and will be accepted on a first-come basis. Please send an s.a.e. or two IRCs (overseas), for full details when they become available, to:

THE 1988 WORLD FANTASY CONVENTION
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CASTIGO

CLINTON DAVIES

Estatofete tossed the silver dollar to Charlie who caught it with obvious enthusiasm and, after biting it cheerfully, began to haul on the heavy chain, gradually pulling his large ferry away from the shore. Estatofete watched him go, wondering as he often did, how such a frail-looking Mexican could move the raft empty, let alone with any number of passengers. After a moment he shrugged and turned his back on the river, shouldered his saddle-bags and began a weary march into the Coahuilan desert.

It would be Django he'd miss the most, he guessed. The faithful pony had been with him since '64, since the war; but he was too well known to risk. Nor could Estatofete just let him free. Only a bullet could do it.

Twelve years, he thought. Twelve years together - and we bin through it all, boy. And one 44 calibre slug ends it all.

Estatofete firmed his mouth and spat noisily into the dust.

"No time to start goin' soft on me!" he hissed.

Would Charlie tell? Sure he would - one lousy silver dollar wouldn't hold out long against all the gold the rangers could flash. Mexico was the last hole he could bolt for - get down south, to Mexico City; maybe even catch a boat out to French Indo-China. It was time to get out, before he got too old.

Old? At forty?

"Sure - now all the guns is toted by punks a'minstem or younger!" A lifetime of experience had small argument against faster reflexes, sharper eyes. He was a man of routines now: the reflex killer, watching over a weary refuge.

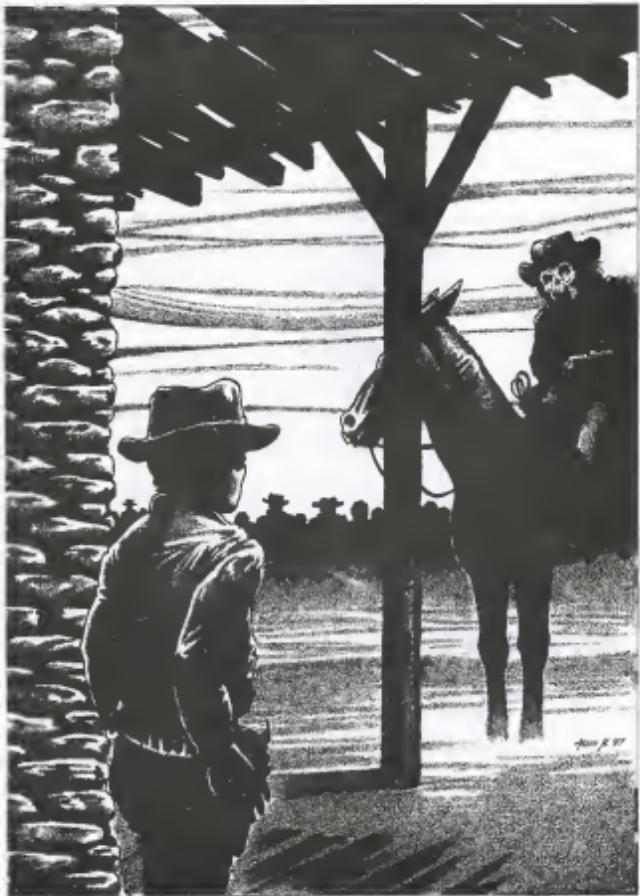
A vagrant breeze whipped the dust into a blinding sheet suddenly, filling his mouth with crunchy bitterness. He pulled up his bandana, hooding nose and mouth - wondering abstractly how many times he had done this simple act before, but rarely for the same reason. The battered rim of his Stetson flopped in the wind, at least shielding his eyes from the stinging grains. Praying the dust storm would soon die down, he plunged southward.

The wind died as abruptly as it had come, and the town reared out of the homogenous blandness like a wooden crap. Thankfully, Estatofete plunged into the blazed shade of the false-fronted buildings.

No one was about - but that was hardly surprising, considering the storm that had just passed: it was the quiet that was strange. The God-awful quiet! A town this size north of the river would have a population of nigh on a hundred people - but there was no one. Not a horse or wagon re-emerging into the now crystal-clear

ARTWORK BY

ALLEN KOSZOWSKI



ALAN E. ROSS

air, no kids running screaming outdoors, no loungers peering out of the only saloon, no suspicious lawman coming at him with buckshot-loaded shotgun.

"Darned if this ain't odd!" murmured Estafette. He shrugged his saddlebags into a more comfortable position and strode towards the saloon. He couldn't see a hotel, guessed the shiny-new saloon would be the only place with beds.

He swung through the doors. Even inside the cool bar all was pristine silence. Tables had neatly-arranged chairs in regular orbit; the bar-rail shone ruddy in the filtered desert light; beer pump handles gleamed proudly above a polished bar-top. But the saloon was empty and silent - even the dust he would have expected to have seen piled in after the swirling clouds outside had passed through was missing from swept floor.

Estafette was uneasy. He'd been through enough towns to know all had a smell: old towns smelled of sweat and horsefoam, horses and black powder; new ones of wood and sap and creosote - but this town smelled of nothing. It was as if the entire collection of buildings had been reared and then overcast by a spell of silence and isolation: people and animals banned, dust and grime held back, only sunlight allowed behind tasseled-curtained windows. He'd heard of Indian medicine-men who'd claimed to be able to do such things.

Stairs led to first floor balcony at the back of the saloon. Estafette saw several numbered doors beyond the balcony rail, saw he'd guessed right. Weariness took control, and he allowed it to trudge his upstairs and lean a door open. Inside a plain bed beckoned more seductively than any San Francisco whore. He threw his bags onto the floor, drew his Smith and Wesson revolver and pushed it under the coarse pillow, and collapsed onto the bed not even bothering to pull off spurs or Stetson.

What the hell if the people have all gone, he thought briefly. Ain't my problem.

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He jerked awake with a cry, hand groping for the concealed 44. Only after several heart-timed seconds did he recognize his surroundings and swing his boots off the rumpled bed. He stood, holstering the revolver and caught sight of himself in a polished mirror over a water pitcher opposite. Tall and gaunt, his checkered blouse and black pants as faded and dusty as his old undershirt, his leather greatcoat with its sleeves long removed and slits cut up each skirt to speed his draw - hash! concord of youth - and leather gloves, the fingers gone - why, when and where he could no longer remember. He rubbed at his chin, the silvery stubble now so long he couldn't see where it ended and his long sideburns and once-prized moustache and goatee began.

He crossed to the pitcher suddenly, anger squeezing his throat for its own subversive reasons. He poured the contents into a bowl and splashed it over his face. The water was fresh! The town hadn't done with its surprises yet.

A faint noise downstairs alerted him. Carefully, he pulled out his Smith and Wesson, and the old ball and cap Colt pocket pistol he still kept inside his shirt, checking they were loaded and primed before slipping them back again. Only then did he open the door and venture onto the balcony.

Routine: check your guns, boy; always look over your shoulder; never turn your back on a wounded man; always look for your move. Routine; it had kept him alive so far.

Someone was standing behind the bar, drinking. He was all in black, with a black serape drooping over his shoulders. As Estafette came cautiously down the stairs, the other turned button-bright black eyes in an otherwise unremarkable face towards him. He smiled and raised a quart beer bottle in salute.

"Morning, friend. Care for a little breakfast?" He produced another quart of beer from under the bar and knocked off the cap with an expert motion. Placing it on the bar-top, he then laid out a loaf, a cold beef joint, and a large pot of mustard.

"Help yourself," he invited. "Sorry about the beer. The cellar's dug and the pump's in - but the barrels are yet to arrive."

Eyeing him suspiciously, Estafete lifted the beer to his lips and took a deep swallow. It burst into acid froth in his mouth and burned deliciously down his throat. He put the bottle down and belched comfortably.

"Food!" urged the other. Estafete pulled a large Bowie knife from his boot and, first wiping it on his sleeve, cut two slices of bread and then carved a generous portion of the beef. Laying the meat on one round he covered it in mustard and slapped the second slice of bread over it. Only after he had eaten half the sandwich and drunk the beer did he speak.

"Where's everybody?"

"Uh, they'll be along shortly." The one in black produced another beer and handed it across the bar. "Welcome to Mastaba."

Estafete raised the bottle halfway to his lips then paused, his expression curiously thoughtful. "Mastaba? I've been through Coahuila many times, mister - but I ain't never seen this place before."

"Not?" The other's black eyes glinted. "New town, Estafete - peopled from north of the river."

Unconsciously, his right hand dropped to caress the butt of his .44, though he took a sip of the beer held in his left.

"Roufner never show fear, boy - just wait for your move; but never show anything."

"You know me?"

The other shrugged and came from behind the bar. "Who doesn't? Your face is posted up across half Texas and New Mexico."

"Guy Estafete; five-eleven, hair graying, beard and moustache. Wanted in Missouri, Texas, New Mexico, Florida, and Louisiana. Worth about \$15,000 - depending on the State or Territory."

"To read the *Police Gazette* thoroughly." Estafete kept his hand near his gun, but relaxed minutely. The man wore no visible guns. Even if he had a concealed pistol it would take longer for him to reach it than the outlaw could draw.

"More than that," continued the man in black. "You've had a long career, growing up during the Kansas-Missouri border wars, rode for the South during the War, and took part in the infamous raid on the Clay County Savings Association, Liberty, Missouri, in 1866. The first bank raid in American history - and you shot and killed the only casualty: George Wyore, a nineteen-year old student on his way to afternoon classes."

"You're a man of history, Estafete - known the Youngers, Quarell, the James brothers, and rode with Quantrell and Bill Anderson. Almost a legend yourself."

The Smith and Wesson decided for itself. It leapt into Estafete's waiting hand and swung its barrel level with the other's heart.

"Just who the hell are you?" breathed Estafete.

The other grinned. "Call me Cuervo - everybody does." His black-bright eyes glanced at the gun aimed at him. "You also carry an old Colt pistol to back up that No 3 .44 revolver. You're known, in fact, for preferring the Smith and Wesson."

"The way people act these days, you'd think Colt was the only arms manufacturer in America." The revolver wavered for a moment, then spun back into the holster. Estafete drained the second beer and finished his beef sandwich.

"There a livery around here?" he asked finally, wiping mustard off his moustache with the back of his left hand. "I'll be needing a horse."

Cuervo shook his head, lips curling at some private joke.

"Shit," mursured the outlaw. He hadn't reckoned on walking south.

"Don't fret yourself," said Cuervo. "Hold on a while longer; I'll see what I can do." He turned abruptly and strode from the silent, empty saloon.

Estafete watched him go, eyes wrinkled narrow. Then he slid the Bowie back into his boot and stepped through the nearly deserted tables and out into the bleak morning sun himself. He figured his saddlebag would be safe enough upstairs.

The town of Mastaba had failed to lose its gloomy air of desolation overnight. Time had failed to tick on since the last board had been nailed up, the final brick mortared down. Even the luxury of tumbleweed and slow burial in dust seemed denied this forlorn place.

Yet Cuervo claimed the inhabitants would be back. Where were they? Estafete wondered. Did they hide somewhere when the dust storm came? Then why hadn't they returned yet? Or was it fear of bandits? That seemed likely enough; Maximilian not dead ten years yet, and Mexico in a worse state than ever.

El Presidente Juarez! Estafete spat into the street expressively.

He had seen ghost towns in California, abandoned after the first hot flush of gold fever had abated; but none conveyed the atmosphere of Mastaba.

Curiosity overcame him, and he began to explore the silent town. It was no different from scores all across the United States and Territories. There was an Emporium, shelves stacked with clothing and boots, candy and canned goods, powder, rope, and oil - all spotless, immaculate, as if a dust storm hadn't ripped through the evening before. A gunsmith, smithy and forge, even a telephone office with a huge clock showing date as well as hour: October 7, 10:12. Estafete pulled out his half-hour to check it, but strangely it had stopped - the first time ever. He wound it irritably - but the watch remained obstinately dead. Probably filled with sand, he guessed.

He heard footfalls outside the office Cuervo returning most likely. Estafete walked outside, in time to see a figure duck around the side of the Emporium.

"Bateson!" Estafete's revolver leapt comfortably into his hand and the man rushed across the street towards the building opposite. Bateson! The son of a bitch had survived after all and followed him here! He hit the side of the Emporium and smashed himself against it, beginning to edge down the alleyway between it and the saloon.

"I'll finish it this time, Bateson!" he hissed, almost inaudibly. He cocked the hammer of the gun, cursing the loud snap it made in Mastaba's sepulchral silence.

He reached the corner and leapt around it, gun preceding him. Only Cuervo's black-clad figure stood there, eying him with serdonic curiously.

"Where's he?" growled Estafete.

"Who?" he asked in a light voice.

"Clyde Bateson! I thought I'd killed him in Laredo - but the bastard's here!"

"Don't concern yourself, Estafete. Clyde Bateson isn't your worry." The man in black walked carelessly by the outlaw, passing the barrel of the .44 groundwards as he passed.

"Just who are you?" spat Estafete, spinning and training his pistol on the other's back. Cuervo paused and turned his head.

"I have no name in the regions which I inhabit," he said. "I am mortal, but am fiend. I was merciless, but am pitiful." Then he faced away and continued up the alleyway.

Estafete's jaw worked soundlessly, a sense of nightmare robbing him of words. Clearly he was alone with a madman. Yet those words? Were they a quote: they were strangely familiar. But the outlaw read very little beyond a few dime novels.

Cuervo's voice floated back to him again, echoing strangely off the wooden buildings.

"Come with me into the Night, and let me unfold to thee the graves."

Fear and rage mingling equally, Estafete ran up the alley into the main street.

The town was busy!

People walked across the dusty street, along the boardwalks; stood at corners, rested in the shade; shopped and sold. But all was silent: not one pair of boots clumped against planks, doors swung noiselessly, a child ran past without a sound. Except for the pocket-watch thudding of his heart, the rasp of his breath, and the sifting of sand beneath his boots, Estafete could have believed himself struck suddenly, profoundly deaf.

He walked as if in a dream to the centre of the street. Eyes followed him with recognition - but no curiosity. The people moved around him like mute mannequins in a complex ballet: a gavotte with meaning only to the dancers.

With a sudden leaping thrill of fear, Estafette noticed that he could no longer see beyond Maatata - the angry swirl of dust had returned. But nothing entered the town. The unguessable barrier held; the outlaw was held in the still, soundless eye of some terrible storm.

Panic mounting, Estafette gazed wildly about, searching the faces with rising fear and disbelief.

"Bateson?" he murmured. "Jossey Flynn, Brendan MacNeil, Ralph Susquehanna?" He spotted a young man run across the street, books clutched under his arm as though late for lessons. Estafette's lips formed the name involuntarily.

"George Wymore."

The sound of hooves behind him broke through the terrifying silence. The outlaw turned, was not surprised to see Cuervo mounted on his old horse, Django.

Estafette's wrinkled eyes implored the other's unreadable black orbs. His beakshakered lips quivered with the questions the weary refugee was too afraid to ask - and the gunfighter could never imagine. Cuervo leaned across the saddle-horn.

"October 1849, you were in Baltimore, helping with the cooping for the local elections: getting poor souls drunk and then dragging them senseless around the polling stations. One of those you grabbed died after being left insensible in a gutter. He was forty years old, you only thirteen."

Unreality washed over Estafette; he remembered the time only too well: his first taste of easy money, before his folks moved west to Missouri. He remembered the death, too - had often wondered in the following twenty-seven years if he had been involved; there had been so many rival cooping gangs, so many dandists plied with drink until they couldn't stand. It was impossible to imagine one had been such a renowned man in the world of letters.

"Edgar Allan Poe," he breathed. "October 7, 1849."

"Routine: don't leave the knowledgeable alive, watch for your move, boy. Routine: cover your tracks any way you can."

The Smith and Wesson raised to point at Cuervo's head. Fugitive railing, killer aware of asking for the third time; the outlaw of twenty-seven years spoke through the lips of a weary, scared old man.

"Who are you?"

"You know." The bright black eyes looked down at the steady barrel and flashed briefly with unguessable humour. Cuervo shook his head.

"Nevermore."

Django wheeled about and trotted off down the main street with Cuervo in the saddle, his black serape flapping gently, towards the rolling dust storm. Estafette stayed motionless, his revolver still raised, aimed at the retreating back.

Around him, the senseless townspeople milled in an aimless dance, swirling closer. Guy Estafette stood under the merciless sun, feeling them close in. Weary refugee and reflex killer paused endlessly, each watching the other.

Waiting for their move.

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